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## THE HISTORICAL STUDY OF RELIGION

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Professional historians have not always included religion within the purview of their science. Toward Christianity in particular their attitude has often been one of deliberate reserve or outright indifference. The task of exploring this phase of humanity's past has usually been left to the theologian, who might or might not employ the methods of study approved by historical science.

Fear of trespassing upon the preserves of the theologian is probably not the sole reason for the historians' neglect of religion, nor is this the only topic that he has been wont to slight. Frequently he has been content to chronicle the deeds of militant princes or scheming statesmen, as though a record of political events constituted the sum total of history. Scarcely a generation ago an eminent professor of modern history at Oxford could still affirm that history is "past politics." This penchant for politics has resulted in fixing the gaze upon monarchs and battles and legislative chambers, to the neglect of those more ordinary activities of mankind which though less spectacular are none the less significant for an understanding of the past.

Today the horizon of the historian is rapidly enlarging. His vision ranges beyond the doings of kings and armies and senates to the life of common humanity. Here he discovers

a complex stream of interest, thought, and action which has been calmly but imperiously moving on its course down through the ages. It is not peculiar to one region or to one people, but is the common denominator of all history from the very beginning of man's existence down to the present moment. Nations rise and fall, warriors and politicians come upon the scene only to disappear from view, while the rank and file of men in every age continue to make history in their own modest fashion. Their quest for food and clothing and other necessities of existence never ceases; they continue their struggle for the acquisition of wealth and power; they constantly strive to safeguard health and happiness through the establishment of various social institutions; they seek æsthetic satisfaction in the production of works of art and music and literature; they search for wisdom in the fields of invention, discovery, and intellectual discipline; and they ever yearn for protection and help in the presence of those mysterious forces of the universe which have so often become objects of fear, love, and worshipful adoration.

With this widening of vision the historian is no longer content to center attention simply upon political happenings. The scope of his observation enlarges to include those common daily interests which have characterized the life of men in general at all times. But no one of these interests has been more conspicuous or persistent than religion. Of humanity's past it can still be said with a large measure of truth that "a man's religion is the chief fact with regard to him—a man's or a nation of men's" Therefore the study of religion falls properly and of necessity within the domain of the historian.

During recent times the horizon of the theologian has also been enlarging. Formerly he was concerned for the most part with maintaining the validity of beliefs and practices current in the religion of his own day. He was interested in the past only as it was thought to furnish guaranties for the present, and he unconsciously overlooked, or deliberately ignored as

unessential to his religion, those features of the past that he found no longer tenable. He saw only the world of his own immediate interests, and so did his work quite unaware of the distortions that inevitably resulted from his lack of historical perspective.

The developments of recent years have tended seriously to disturb the accustomed complacency of the theologian. The static world of yesterday has become the dynamic and evolving universe of the twentieth century. Past and present no longer coincide, but are clearly differentiated stages in the historic process. This process of becoming is disclosed to view throughout the whole range of mankind's experience, not excepting even his religion. Hence the theologian is gradually coming to recognize that religion—even Christianity—is a genuinely historical phenomenon and that if he is to remain master in his own household he must learn the ways of the scientific historian.

The application of scientific historical principles to the study of religion might be a somewhat simpler task if historians were entirely agreed among themselves regarding their own methodology. But just as there is a “new” theology, whose propriety and validity have often been called in question, so there is a “new” history which has been gradually winning its way to recognition in recent times. In the first place, we shall attempt to state in summary fashion the distinctive characteristics of this modern science of history.

## I

Probably not even the most ardent champion of new methods in the study of history would care to deny the fundamental importance of documents, or to abandon the slogan “no documents, no history.” If historical investigation is to be in any sense scientific it must deal with concrete data. Where specific documents or other similarly tangible evidences from the past are lacking, no sound historical knowledge is

obtainable. The new history shares with the old the latter's insistence upon the acquisition of accurate statistics.

On the other hand mere study of documents may become a serious handicap to the would-be historian. The ultimate unit in history is not the document, but the contemporary social order, of which the document may have been merely an incidental product. Yet sometimes the study of literary records and archaeological remains becomes so inherently absorbing that no appreciable effort is made to visualize the social background necessary for the correct interpretation of all historical data. One may be an expert in documentary statistics and yet utterly ignore the task of the historian in the larger sense of the term. The new history asks its representatives to make *society* rather than documents their point of departure in reconstructing the story of the past.

Now society in any age is an exceedingly complex affair. Even our professional sociologists, with the rich materials of the present at their disposal, do not find it easy to unravel the intricacies of the modern social nexus. Much less can it be expected that the historian, dependent as he is upon relatively meager sources of information, will be able to lay bare all the secrets of society's life during the centuries that have passed. Nevertheless acceptance of the social point of view does signify some very definite things for the historian's method.

At the very outset this social emphasis calls for the abandonment of the static conception of history attaching so readily to the notion of documents, which by their fixity of form have become specific entities for all time. Similarly the historical institutions of any period or people have often been treated as though they were fixed quantities that might be studied in isolation from the social milieu by which they were produced and maintained. When, on the other hand, one centers attention upon the great on-going process of society's evolution, out of which documents and institutions have from time to time emerged, history can no longer be regarded as primarily

a study of static entities. Its more comprehensive and fundamental aim must be to exhibit, as far as possible, the on-flowing currents of real life throughout the ages. Thus a *developmental* conception of the past dominates in the method of the modern historian.

Adoption of the developmental point of view in historical thinking leads on to another important item in the definition of method. Frequently historians assume that their task is simply to describe, with such accuracy of detail as the records may justify, the happenings of the past. They deliberately refrain from attempting to discover the causes that have determined the course of events. So long as it was customary to seek these causes entirely in the realms of supernaturalism and metaphysical speculation the historian wisely left this quest to theologians and philosophers. He, as a mere historian, had no objective data from the realms in question. But when historical processes are viewed as facts of social evolution they become amenable to laws of empirical investigation and so constitute a suitable subject for scientific inquiry. In fact it is an established canon of the new history that he alone is historically minded in the true sense of the term who sees the happenings of the past in their proper *genetic* connections. To have real historical knowledge one must be familiar, not only with specific events, but also with the casual nexus underlying phenomena.

Search for the genetic forces that enter into the determination of the historical process leads, further, to consideration of the environment by which men of the past have found themselves surrounded. Since society in the last analysis is an aggregation of human beings more or less closely organized and acting under the impetus of varied stimuli, the question of environmental contacts justly occupies a place of considerable importance in the historian's attention. Peculiarities distinguishing different groups of the human family from one another used to be dismissed offhand on the hypothesis of

inherent racial traits, but nowadays the influence of habitat and climate is taken into account as among the significant factors determining racial characteristics. Even within more homogeneous groups the *physical environment* cannot be ignored in one's quest for the genetic forces that have determined the course of history

When observation is centered upon the smaller units of society the importance of environment usually increases in proportion to the minuteness of one's analysis. Within a complex organism a multiplicity of *social stimuli* are in constant operation shaping the direction of history. The power of inherited customs and ideas is easily recognized by even a casual observer in the field of social motivations. At times crucial political experiences have furnished noteworthy incentives for action. Less spectacular and also less sporadic in its occurrence is the pressure of the never ceasing economic quest in which the vast majority of men are always involved. These are but a few of the more easily recognizable forces to be taken account of by one who would even approximate a full analysis of the genetic forces that operate within the average social order.

While man is a social creature, it is also true that he is possessed of both conscious and unconscious mental life. No study of his past is scientific which does not recognize the significance of the *psychological* factor in history. There is on the one hand the mental life of the individual and, perhaps more significant for history as a whole, the psychology of the group. The mental interests and activities of the group, as it reacts to heritages and environmental stimuli, determine the social customs of any particular age or people. It is also in this psychological world of the mass, so to speak, that new tendencies and convictions, emerging from time to time in the course of historical evolution, attain general recognition.

The new history does not deny the great man a place in its esteem, nor would it necessarily reject outright the familiar

assertion that "the history of what man has accomplished in this world is at bottom the history of the great men who have worked here." But the life of the great man is always socially conditioned both in its genesis and in its operations. Were it possible for his interests and ideas to become so entirely novel as to separate him completely from the common life of his contemporaries, history undoubtedly would adjudge him a freak rather than a hero. The significance of the individual mind is not necessarily obscured, but on the contrary may become more apparent, by a fuller recognition of the so-called *social mind* than was formerly customary among historians.

Furthermore, the will of the mass, whether operating unconsciously under the force of circumstances or voluntarily pursuing its own intelligent purposes, finds its characteristic expression in the *institutional* life of the group. For this reason the modern historian is quite as much interested in institutions as in persons. An established institution reveals more or less clearly the common habits and beliefs of a particular age, while an individual, however conspicuous, may not be truly representative of the historical process in the large, and indeed the more striking is his personality the less likely is he to be representative at all.

To restore a picture of ancient society in whole or in part along the foregoing lines is no easy task. One might fear that the "new" history had attempted the impossible. At best literary remains and archaeological finds are but secondary witnesses to the actual performances in real life of peoples long since deceased. True, their institutions may in some instances survive, but immediate contact with the vital social processes of antiquity is no longer possible. In this respect the students of modern society have a marked advantage over their collaborators in the historical field. It is only by the most rigorous effort to orient himself psychologically in the ancient world that the historian may hope to acquire the proper perspective and the trustworthy historical imagination necessary for his task.

Fortunately for modern historians, at the present time valuable assistance may be derived from workers in other fields closely related to the study of history. From the sociologist and the psychologist one may learn much about the nature of society both in its material and in its mental aspects. While it would be absurd to assume that modern civilization is merely a replica of ancient society, nevertheless it is unquestionably true that the more elemental interests and the characteristic impulses of the human species, particularly in its group life, have perpetuated themselves from generation to generation substantially unaltered. It is in the realm of presuppositions underlying thought and conduct that change has been most pronounced, but at this point the assistance of the anthropologist may be sought. Until within relatively recent times the scientific bases of modern thinking were quite unknown, hence the unscientific presuppositions entertained by primitive societies and individuals, as disclosed especially by the modern study of anthropology, may often be of far greater service than twentieth-century scientific concepts in helping the historian to orient himself within the life of the ancient world.

Such in barest outline are the more noteworthy principles of scientific method employed today in the field of historical study. We may now ask, in the second place, how a recognition of these principles affects the study of religion.

## II

The historian who undertakes the study of religion is confronted at the outset by a serious challenge. Has he the equipment and capacity for dealing with the subject in hand? As a professed scientist his method of procedure must be strictly inductive; all of his conclusions are to be derived from concrete and empirically verifiable data. He lacks chart and compass for navigating those treacherous seas of poetic fancy, mystical emotion, and metaphysical speculation which in vary-

ing degrees have always played a conspicuous rôle in all religions. To be sure, he possesses tolerably accurate instruments for measuring the extent to which such phenomena have been current in the past; he can trace with some degree of certainty their historical evolution; frequently he is able to define the circumstances by which they have been produced and maintained; and he can note the function served by them in the various religions. But beyond these experimentally ascertainable facts he, in the capacity of historian, may not go.

This is not to say that the historian would deny religion its right to be fancy free in exploring those regions of emotion and speculation that lie beyond the present boundaries of empirical knowledge. But he would distinguish sharply between his own task, as an observer and interpreter of historical data, and that of the speculative theologian whose principal concern has always been with problems lying outside the realm of experimentally attestable knowledge. The very nature of his science compels the historian to choose the former field for his operations. He works under the conviction that religion can be best understood by giving first attention, not to its theoretical aspects, but to its actual historical manifestations; and when speculative interpretations and historical research meet on common ground he will insist that all hypotheses be judged at the bar of his science.

In his search for the historic facts of religion the student who adopts modern methodology will aim ultimately to interpret religious movements, and only incidentally to expound sacred literatures. This observation, while true in connection with the study of all religions, is peculiarly in point for the student of Christianity. Particularly during the last half-century its sacred book, especially the New Testament, has been engaging the attention of numerous scholars. Scientific methods have been employed in recovering the most original form of its text, note has been taken of the circumstances under which its various parts were composed, and the documents

have been expounded as expressions of the minds of their several authors. These results are of immense significance for a historical understanding of the New Testament, but they are scarcely more than introductory to the work of the modern historian of early Christianity. His ultimate concern is with the real people who constituted the personnel of the Christian communities, and who acquired and exhibited their religion in actual life as members of a definite social order. When viewing religion thus as a vital factor in the social evolution of humanity, the historian clearly differentiates his task from both that of the speculative theologian and that of the distinctively biblical interpreter.<sup>1</sup>

When linked up thus inseparably with the evolution of society, religion must be viewed as essentially a developmental rather than a static phenomenon. Religions, like other factors in the social order, emerge and increase by a gradual process of growth from simpler to more elaborate forms. It is the business of the historian to follow the course of this evolutionary process from first to last. Within the last half-century this developmental conception has completely transformed our study of the ethnic faiths. Instead of assuming, as was formerly the custom, that heathen religions are the result of a degeneration from a purer and nobler type of faith, we now recognize that they are products of actual growth resulting from a gradual process of expansion increasing in complexity under the continued stimulus of social environment.

Perhaps it is less easy to appreciate the significance of the developmental conception of religion as applied to Christianity. Its history has usually been read not in the language of evolution but in terms of definite quantities of doctrine, custom, and organization. But modern historical study treats these entities as products of the Christian movement which itself is visualized and interpreted primarily as a process of historical

<sup>1</sup> As an indication of this growing interest in vital religion socially conceived, one may note that the present *Journal of Religion* supersedes a journal of "theology" and a "biblical world."

evolution in religious living on the part of persons and groups of persons affected very immediately by the contemporary social order.

In treating of factors that influence the evolution of religions, the historian is restricted by the very canons of his science to such items as can be discovered in the actual personal experiences of the devotees of a religion. For the student of Christianity in particular, this phase of modern method may prove at the outset somewhat disturbing. The time-honored custom of resorting to an alleged revelation, which is assumed to operate independently of ordinary human experiences, and the habit of regarding Christianity as inherently possessed of an unhistorically conditioned quantity of generative spiritual energy, not only has prejudiced one against considering seriously the possibility of normal social influences but has left nothing to be gained from this source of inquiry. This attitude of mind is incompatible with the method of the scientific historian. In discussing the question of genesis he insists that the fountains of empirical knowledge are to be exhausted before the problem is passed on to the metaphysician.

Consequently the modern student vigorously interrogates the environment in order to extract its secrets regarding the genetic forces that have gone into the shaping of religions. It should be noted that his concern is with concrete religions and not with religion in the abstract, for no mere historian can hope to snare this creature of speculative fancy. But where definite people and specific religions alone are involved, the question of environmental influences is capable of thoroughly scientific treatment. From the point of view of historical study, life in relation to surroundings is the primal stuff out of which religions evolve. They result from man's effort to secure and perpetuate the welfare of the group or of the individual in contact with environment, particularly in its less thoroughly mastered aspects.

It follows that the vital interests which are dominant at any particular period or in any specific community, and the means available for the satisfaction of these interests, are, historically speaking, the determining factors in the making of a religion. Except in the most primitive of societies, these factors are exceedingly complex and the task of the historian is correspondingly difficult. But no study can hope to approximate accuracy and completeness if it omits analysis of the surroundings amid which the adherents of any specific religion live. Even the common place facts of habitat and climate are not without their influence. The Iranian plateau, the mountain-girt districts of Greece, the detached territory of Palestine, all left their mark in one way or another upon the religion of their respective inhabitants. Frequently political events have affected very materially the course of religious history. Not less significant, though much less frequently observed, are those incentives which operate in the sphere of common daily experience. These more ordinary social motivations may emerge in the form of economic interests, group rivalries, or a host of other elemental impulses, all of which must come under the observation of the historian in his study of religion. And in case of a religion which emerges and develops within a social order already highly organized, as was the case with Christianity, the fact of acquisitions derived from predecessors and contemporaries becomes peculiarly important.

That the student of religion should be fully cognizant of the psychological factor in history goes without saying. In no other realm of human experience does mental life, whether of the individual or of the community, figure more prominently. Conversion experiences, ecstatic visions, marvelous revelations, and other mental phenomena both ordinary and extraordinary are always in evidence. The student who ventures upon the interpretation of these items without some knowledge of modern psychological science will find himself greatly hampered in his work; and he will be a blind guide indeed if he fails to

appreciate the immense influence which psychological interests have exerted within the sphere of religion at all times.

The student of religion needs especially to be reminded of the significance of institutions as a factor in history. There is a very strong temptation to be content with portraying the careers of distinguished individuals, or recounting the popular myths, or expounding theological systems. But one who should desire, for example, to comprehend the real significance of religion as a fact of life among the Greek people, would hardly find his quest satisfied in the Homeric description of the Olympian deities or in the theogony of Hesiod. The Greek religion of real life is to be discovered most truly from a study of specific cults operating as institutionally organized movements. But this latter aspect of religion often lacks those picturesque features that appeal to the imagination and accordingly its importance for the historian is not always appreciated. Similarly among interpreters of Christianity, particularly in Protestant circles, interest in persons and dogmas has commonly towered far above interest in institutions. Modern historical method calls for a correction of this one-sidedness and emphasizes the fundamental place of institutional activities in the evolution of religions.

In the pursuit of these various lines of inquiry the historian of religion no less than his colleague in the so-called secular field—and perhaps even to a greater degree—needs the assistance of co-workers in allied departments of research. From the sociologist he seeks information regarding those social motivations and activities that may be found to characterize the life of mankind. To the psychologist he goes for knowledge of the ways in which mental interests may determine the behavior of individuals and communities. And the anthropologist may render him indispensable service by making more clear the contrast between the presuppositions of a primitive age and those postulates by which he as a man of the twentieth century is accustomed to regulate his conduct and thinking.

## III

Finally, we may ask what practical value results from the application of scientific historical methods to the study of religion? It is a very old notion that history is "the handmaid of providence, the priestess of truth, and the mother of wisdom." For centuries men have been accustomed to look upon the past as the unique source of ideals and norms for the guidance of life in the present and the future. Within the sphere of religion this reverence for antiquity has often been enhanced—as is the case for example in Judaism and Christianity—by resorting to the hypothesis of a special revelation to guarantee the authority of ancient customs and beliefs. From this point of view it is the business of the student to derive from history, especially from the history of religion, authoritative examples and normative precepts without which subsequent generations would be quite incapable of realizing a worthy type of life. And such reformers as may appear from time to time must make their egress out of the past into the present with their faces turned steadfastly toward antiquity.

Belief in the normative function of history rests ultimately upon that pessimistic philosophy of life which interprets the present as a deterioration of humanity, a condition to be remedied only by the restoration of an idealized past. This was a widespread mode of thinking among the ancients, who were wont to believe that remote antiquity veiled a golden age, in comparison with which present times were sorely degenerate. But when history is viewed scientifically, as an evolutionary process in human living, the past inevitably loses its authoritative character. The order of progression throughout the ages is seen to be from the simpler to the more complex, and there is no discoverable warrant for affirming that the attainments of any past age should be regarded as normative for all subsequent times. There is no apparent reason for preferring the past above the present, or for rejecting the poet's hope that "the best is yet to be."

Cultural features of a past age are to be evaluated strictly from the standpoint of their social and functional significance. The extent to which they meet the needs—both material and spiritual—of mankind in a particular age and environment, is the true measure of their worth for the people of that day. Likewise, their value for subsequent generations will be conditioned by pragmatic tests. Where environments repeat themselves substantially unchanged for a succession of years and the great mass of human interests moves along in accustomed channels, the cultural attainments of an earlier day easily retain their grip on society and assume the dignity of an absolute authority. But a radical change in surroundings or a powerful awakening of new interests leads sooner or later to revolutions and reformations. This fact is seen to be true of all history whether in its secular or in its religious aspects.

Thus one very significant result of modern historical study is the deliverance which it gives from bondage to the past as an ideal for modern living. But to abandon the notion of normativeness does not mean a denial of history's value for the man of today and tomorrow. On the contrary, it takes on a new and larger meaning in the light of modern methods. One is able now to understand as never before how present society in all its various phases has actually come into being. Viewed as an evolutionary process, the course of history discloses how existing institutions and beliefs have arisen through the operation of definite genetic agencies within the life of humanity. Thus one is led to realize that the character of future societies will also be determined, not by forces acting from without, but by a process of vital growth from within. This fact emphasizes in a new and helpful way that the opportunity for bettering mankind's condition and the responsibility for accomplishing this task lie with men themselves.

History also has a significant word to say with regard to the nature of the reformer's ideal. The normativeness of criteria adopted from antiquity is found to be illusory.

Whether a new social order is to be "good" or "bad" will depend entirely upon the degree to which it satisfies the vital needs of real people then living. At first glance the student of religion in particular may hesitate to accept this dictum of the historian, for religion has been accustomed to insist perhaps more strenuously than any other phase of our culture upon the authority of the past. Yet historical inquiry readily shows that even the rites and dogmas of religion have not been able to withstand permanently the imperious demands of pragmatic necessity. Once upon a time it could have been held—and in fact was so held—that to accept the Copernican astronomy would mean a rejection of authoritative Christian teaching. Nevertheless the views of Copernicus have triumphed, for they have come to be regarded by men in general as necessary to intelligent thinking about the heavenly bodies.

The mighty pressure of human needs, as they increase in extent and intensity, cannot be resisted for long even by the powerful conservatism of religions, and one who has read history wisely will not be found spending his energies in a futile effort to lay the dead hand of the past upon the spontaneous life of the future. History teaches the prophet that he must justify his message, not by the norm of theory, but by the mandate of efficiency, and that ultimately he must derive his sanctions not from the past but from the future. The attainment of this conviction cannot fail to mean in the end a tremendous gain in effectiveness among all classes of workers for the advancement of human welfare.

It may not be inappropriate to note in passing that history raises many a signal of warning for the well-meaning enthusiast who would transform an old order into a new with a single turn of the wheel. The process of social change is necessarily slow, and transformations, to be genuinely effective, must inhere in the very structure of the evolutionary process. This is a fact needing to be noted particularly by students of religion. Programs hastily superimposed, before a general demand has

been awakened for the values they aim to conserve, are foredoomed to failure. How often zealous prophets of a new day, lacking the steadyng power that might have been derived from a better knowledge of history, have gone down to defeat chiefly in consequence of their determination to save the world by their favorite program in their own generation! But the mills of the gods grind slowly in the making of history as in the administration of justice.

Although history may not yield authoritative norms for future conduct, has it no prophetic function? Does it not reveal laws that enable one to forecast the destiny of man from the handwriting on the walls of time? Having at the outset relinquished the privilege of appealing to metaphysics, the historian is unprepared to affirm that there is an abstract theological principle governing the progress of social evolution. He hesitates also to posit for history a mechanistic order of development fashioned after the analogy of biological laws. He recognizes that social progress moves forward by the method of trial and error, so to speak, and that the course of development is on the whole determined by forces inhering within the social order itself, but to predict the exact way in which these complex factors will combine to produce the society of the future is too venturesome an undertaking for the historian.

Even though he aspires to no prophetic function, the modern student of history is not without his faith in the future. To be sure, adherence to his scientific principle of empirical research makes him unwilling to seek guaranties beforehand either in a metaphysical theory or in a biological analogy, but he is gravely impressed with the stately progress of society's evolution throughout past ages. Man is seen keeping step with the rest of the universe—nay, leading the van—in the procession of the ages. And that confidence which is born of faith in the future of the cosmos carries with it faith in the future of society. Thus derived, the laws of history are laws of the universe, and the laws of the universe are laws of God.